



WHITE HOUSE INITIATIVE ON  
EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE FOR HISPANIC AMERICANS

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## KIVA PROCESS

### Purpose

**To hold a different type of group conversation where participants learn from each other, listen first before they critique, and get the chance to speak and have their ideas considered. They also receive a written record of the group's conversation, captured in the exact words of each participant.**

The Kiva process is a tool groups can use to hold group conversations that:

- Allow large numbers of participants to fully participate and have their voices heard;
- Focus on small group dialogues as opposed to lectures by experts to large groups;
- Encourage participants to actively listen rather than automatically critique or analyze what is being presented to the group;
- Permit a larger number of perspectives to be included in the conversation;
- Lead to presenters listening and responding to each other's comments and starting a conversation amongst themselves as opposed to solely presenting their isolated views; and
- Produce written documents that capture the group's knowledge and perspective on the issues discussed.

### Background

#### *Sacred Ceremonial Ground*

The Kiva process comes from American Indians who have historically used certain practices to help them discuss important issues of the tribe. For many tribes, the kiva was an actual physical location located above or below the ground to symbolize that what they were about to share was not ordinary, every day work. It was upon this sacred ceremonial ground where the tribe would come together for sacred work.

#### *Rule of Six*

Many tribes believe in the Rule of Six—the idea that you can randomly select six different members of the tribe and that you are likely to receive a full spectrum of the different possibilities of experience or perspectives related to different issues. The six

symbolize the four directions—North, South, East and West—along with the spiritual worlds that exist below and above the earth. In our use of the kiva process, the presenters, who can range in size, serve as the Rule of Six for those participating.

### *Seven Generations*

While the issues dealt with in the kiva have traditionally been the most difficult for the tribe, many American Indians believe that these conversations can be greatly enhanced if members of the tribe hold in their heads, and more importantly in their hearts, Seven Generations. Each generation will focus selfishly on its own survival, but to arrive at the best possible solution for the tribe, many American Indians believe you must also keep in mind the struggles, battles, victories, and challenges of the three generations that came before you along with the impact your decisions will have on the future of the tribe, the three generations that will come after you. If you can hold these Seven Generations close to you as you engage in the most difficult conversations, you will, according to this worldview, find the wisdom necessary in the tribe to do the right thing.

### **Kiva Process**

Instead of a traditional panel where experts make long speeches and then listen to a handful of questions from the audience—which typically are long-winded comments masquerading as questions—this technique centers around small groups of participants who actively listen to the presenters talking to each other, followed by a discussion of the highlights of those conversations. The goals of this process are to give the presenters a chance to voice their opinions; allow the presenters to engage in dialogue with the other presenters; and to encourage the audience to listen carefully, have their voices heard, and allow them to talk about the presenters' comments in a small group setting. The final piece is centered on capturing the collective knowledge of the group participating.

### *Set up*

Here is how the Kiva process works. The presenters, serving as the Rule of Six for the larger group, will be seated in a circle facing outward toward the audience. The audience members will be seated at small tables around the room. Typically, we try to limit the number of participants at each table to between six to eight people. There will be three rounds of kiva conversation during our sessions, but you are free to determine how many rounds you will hold. We typically use three rounds. The presenters will be responsible for starting the conversation by giving short answers to a major question or set of major questions.

### *Presenters*

In each round, the presenters will have the opportunity to respond to the major question twice, each time for approximately a minute or a minute and a half, depending on how

much time you have allocated for each session. The first time, presenters will give a silo answer, which means they will respond to the question having no idea what the other presenters will say. After each presenter has answered the question once, each presenter will immediately be given a chance to respond a second time; this time reacting to something brought up by one of the other presenters.

### *Small Group Reflection and Introduction of All Voices*

Once each Rule of Six presenter has spoken twice on a question, the focus is then shifted to the rest of the participants, who have been broken up into smaller groups. At this point, presenters join one of the smaller groups as participants, not as experts. Within each small group, the members will first, in silence, write down a key word or phrase from the presenter's comments that captured their attention. This is done to force the audience to listen carefully. Most of the time, we have been trained to hear something and automatically critique it and offer our own opinions rather than listening openly to entire conversations. After this moment of reflection ends, each member in the group offers his/her key word or phrase as a way of making sure all voices are heard. This is not a time for speeches, lecturing, posturing, or offering an opinion. It is a time to hear what the community heard, not what they think about it.

### *Small Group Discussion Guided by Ground Rules*

Next, the small groups engage in a conversation based on what they heard and what they want to discuss. During this time, audience members get the chance to express their opinions and comments. The facilitator at each table or a designated participant in each group makes sure no one dominates the conversation and does his/her best to ensure everyone has an opportunity to be heard following ground rules established by the group.

### *Capturing Community Knowledge*

At the end of the conversation period, each member of the group, including presenters, will reflect on everything that has been said and will write down possible answers to the major question. Each participant writes his/her own answers and reflections on index card-sized post-it notes. This is not an exercise to see what the group consensus was, it is the time to see what every individual thought about the question being addressed in his/her own words, not someone else's translation of the conversation.

We typically have everyone contribute as many items as they wish, but, once again, it is completely up to you to decide how many responses you want from your participants. These answers will be taken and transcribed as a positive record of the group's attempt to address the major issues discussed and each participant will receive a copy of the proceedings so they can have a record of what the community discussed in each round. This process is then repeated for the other rounds.

## *Major Questions*

The following example is a set of questions we used with 200 community leaders from 10 cities who were tackling the tough issues of race, ethnicity and diversity. The Stop-Keep-Start combination has been a successful model for us.

Example: With regards to the toughest diversity challenges in your community, what should we:

1. Stop doing,
2. Keep doing, and
3. Start doing

to build a stronger community for all the residents of your city?

Feel free to develop whatever set of questions you feel are appropriate for your group's kiva process.

We have used the Stop-Keep-Start approach because it allows us to ask broad questions, which give presenters the freedom to answer in many different ways. We typically begin with the Stop question because it is easier for people to reflect on the bad things, the items they wish to halt. We then move to the Keep question, which is more difficult for people because it asks them to identify current pieces that are working and that should be retained. We then close with the Start question because it allows people to dream of the future and of the possibilities they would like to see.